



OHIO HIGH INTENSITY DRUG TRAFFICKING AREA

Investigative Support Center

984 Keynote Circle

Brooklyn Heights, OH 44131-1828

Phone 216-739-3500 Fax 216-739-3518

Prepared for the Committee on Government Reform
Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources

Testimony of John Sommer
Director, Ohio High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA)

August 23, 2005

Chairman Souder, and distinguished members of this committee, my name is John Sommer, and I have been the director of the Ohio HIDTA since January 1, 2000. I first would like to thank the committee for its attention to exploring potential ways the federal government can partner with state and local law enforcement agencies in combating the rise of methamphetamine abuse and trafficking in this region. Additionally, I wish to thank you for this opportunity for input from the Ohio HIDTA Program. The Ohio HIDTA Program began June 15, 1999 with the authorization for funding of five counties, including Cuyahoga, Lucas, Mahoning, Summit and Stark. On October 1, 2004, six additional counties were authorized and subsequently added: Fairfield, Franklin, Greene, Hamilton, Montgomery and Warren. The Ohio HIDTA Executive Board consists of the ATF, DEA, FBI, ICE, IRS, United States Attorney's Office, United States Marshal's Service, United States Secret Service, Akron Police Department, Ohio Bureau of Criminal Identification and Investigation (BCI&I), Canton Police Department, Cleveland Police Department, Cuyahoga County Sheriff's Office, Shaker Heights Police Department, Toledo Police Department, Youngstown Police Department, and Warren County Sheriff's Office. Also serving in the ex-officio capacity is the Ohio National Guard (Counter Drug Program).

The Ohio HIDTA fosters a partnership between law enforcement agencies, thereby increasing their cooperative effort within the region and with other HIDTAs. At last count, the Ohio HIDTA has the participation of 378 task force officers and support staff representing 97 law enforcement agencies statewide. We emphasize information-sharing, case support, deconfliction practices, and training throughout the Ohio HIDTA region to protect our officers and citizens from the dangers of illicit drugs and associated crimes of violence.

National Coordination Efforts

Nationally the HIDTA program, in its ability to coordinate and communicate with federal, state and local law enforcement officials, is in a unique position. The collection of multi-agency leaders participating on individual HIDTA boards, individual task force boards and/or oversight committees allows for current information and trends to be shared on the growing concerns and dangers of methamphetamine production, distribution and use. The HIDTA program supports the National Methamphetamine Chemicals Initiative (NMCI). The work of the NMCI includes the coordination of law enforcement efforts, intelligence sharing, and training with regard to chemicals used in the manufacture of methamphetamine. NMCI is also playing a key role in developing and institutionalizing the National Clandestine Laboratory Seizure System (NCLSS). Nationally, the latest survey indicates there are 211 HIDTA task forces across the nation with 5,321 officers representing 34 states and territories who, in addition to other duties, are substantially involved in enforcement efforts regarding the distribution and/or manufacturing of methamphetamine.

Methamphetamine Threat

As with all other HIDTAs, the Ohio HIDTA must continuously update the current drug threat and trend analysis to adjust the enforcement strategy of all of our thirteen multi-agency drug enforcement task forces. Although the worst problems in most of Ohio's major cities continue to be associated with cocaine, crack cocaine, heroin and marijuana, the current meth epidemic is creating a much greater path of destruction statewide in a shorter period of time. As indicated in the 2005 Threat Assessment, methamphetamine abuse, availability and production are increasing in the Ohio HIDTA region. According to EPIC, the number of methamphetamine-related seizures in Ohio, including laboratories, dumpsites and chemical/glass/equipment, has drastically increased from 29 in 2000 to 315 in 2004. As of August 18, 216 methamphetamine-related seizures have already been conducted this year. Local Caucasian independent distributors are the

primary source of production, distribution and abuse of methamphetamine. These labs are referred to as “mom and pop” operations. The hazardous waste clean up from these labs has been handled with DEA-funded hazardous waste companies. There is no local funding available specifically for handling hazardous waste. The DEA and state of Ohio spent \$680,447 in clean-up costs in 2004 as compared to \$362,000 the previous year.

The net effect of this new epidemic has resulted in serious consequences for Ohio law enforcement. Many local narcotics task forces around the state, already taxed with investigations of cocaine, heroin and marijuana traffickers, are now overwhelmed by this new epidemic. The cost in man-hours is astronomical and the work is doubly dangerous; the officers are dealing with dangerous criminals and dangerous chemicals. At the end of the day there are no forfeitures to reinvest in their task forces, just a costly hazardous waste site to clean up. For every pound of meth produced five to six pounds of toxic waste are produced. A tragic result of this epidemic has been an increase in child abuse and neglect as well as an increase in domestic violence. Children have often been damaged by exposure to the dangerous chemicals in the toxic “mom and pop” labs.

Ohio is experiencing an alarming trend with regard to bulk methamphetamine, which is being shipped into this area from the southwestern United States. Super labs, either in Mexico or in the southwest border states, are responsible for this bulk product. It should be noted that although ranked 35th in the nation by geographic size, Ohio has the fourth largest interstate network that carries the third largest amount of truck traffic. Geographically, Ohio lies midway between Chicago and New York City, making it a national cross roads for the distribution of manufacturing goods, automotive production, agricultural commodities and interstate trade. This commercial distribution network naturally facilitates the transportation and distribution of illegal drugs such as methamphetamine.

Although the entire state is affected by this serious health and safety threat, I would like to discuss Summit County, which has been hardest hit by this epidemic.

Enforcement Response- Summit County

Over one-third of all clan labs in the state have been uncovered in Summit County. Rather than characterizing this county as the “Meth Capital of Ohio,” it would be more accurately characterized as the “Meth Response Capital of Ohio.” Within the Ohio HIDTA region, this northeastern county has been hit the hardest with 186 meth sites including laboratories, chemical caches, and dumpsites uncovered between 2001 and 2004. The Akron/Summit County HIDTA Initiative addressing meth labs in Summit County has observed a 210% increase in meth site seizures in 2004. This initiative has also encountered several homemade explosive devices at meth lab sites, adding further danger to an already potential lethal situation. In one instance, the device consisted of a black powder filled container connected to a phone cord. Explosive ordinance experts determined that this explosive device could have been detonated remotely by telephone. Fortunately for the responding officers, the lab operator was not able to make the call. Meth use and production encompasses approximately 19% of all Summit County Drug Unit arrests. In 2004 the Summit County Drug Unit and the Greater Akron Drug Task Force shut down 102 clan labs. As of August 12, 2005, this same initiative is already significantly ahead of last year’s total with 86 clan labs dismantled, and nearly half of the year remaining.

Not only are the “mom and pop” labs being aggressively pursued, a recent case revealed a local drug-trafficking organization distributing pound to multi-pound quantities of Mexican organized

crime manufactured crystal meth. Conservative estimates indicate that this organization imported and distributed more than 200 pounds of crystal meth. The increased pattern of manufacture and distribution, as well as product coming from outside sources, is supported in the 2004 Ohio Substance Abuse Monitoring Network (OSAM). Some crystal meth from Mexican-controlled labs has been shown to be 98% in purity when analyzed. Response team members have found numerous weapons to include AK-47's, semi-automatic handguns, and an M-16. A Summit County investigation resulted in more than two pounds of meth being seized from a Hell's Angels' stash house in a small suburban township.

A rising number of low to mid-level clan labs are supplying local abusers. These labs are typically producing one to three ounces of methamphetamine per "cook." The production sites have left behind hazardous waste contamination. These labs have been found in hotels, motels and rental properties, as well as at the roadside or in parks. Recently, one park had to be closed due to contamination. These systems are known as "box labs," and are transported via personal and commercial vehicles throughout the county. These labs pose obvious threats to citizens and safety personnel. This year, six police officers had to receive medical treatment after inhaling toxic fumes when a man was arrested and charged with operating a methamphetamine laboratory in a mobile home. Last year, nine explosions/fires occurred in Summit County as a direct result of meth production. The average cost of a small clean up is \$2,000. However when one considers the cost in man hours for police, fire, EMT, and social services personnel and the costs for medical treatment for uninsured meth addicts and their affected family members, the impact on our communities is staggering.

Captain Hylton Baker, who commands the Summit County Drug Unit, made the following comments:

"With the overwhelming support of the Ohio HIDTA since its inception in 2001, I feel that the Akron/Summit County HIDTA Initiative has become one of the most successful and productive initiatives in the nation. I believe that if we lose our HIDTA support, we are doomed. With our level of drug traffickers and our high numbers of methamphetamine labs, we cannot afford to go back where we were in the 1990's."

Ohio HIDTA's Response

At a local selling price of \$2,000 per ounce on the streets, Ohio HIDTA initiatives conservatively stopped the production of over \$700,000 worth of raw methamphetamine in 2004. The Ohio HIDTA, with its limited resources, targets the distribution and manufacturing of methamphetamine in a comprehensive, coordinated and multi-faceted approach. In addition, the Ohio HIDTA helps in supporting methamphetamine awareness programs. These programs provide awareness to law enforcement and safety forces, including police agencies, fire departments, parole and probation officers, prosecutors and children's services agents, as well as citizen's groups including realtors, community organizations and watch groups, health department and medical officials, municipal service providers, and school students. Since January of 2004, nearly sixty awareness presentations have been provided throughout Summit County alone.

The Ohio HIDTA continues to develop and maintain a working relationship with members of the media. This not only promotes a trust, but, because we are willing to work with them and share information, that information is provided to the public which increases both public awareness and involvement.

Training

The Ohio HIDTA has an aggressive threat-driven training program. Since 2001, the Ohio HIDTA has provided clandestine/methamphetamine lab training to 202 federal, state, and local law enforcement officers, representing 3,048 hours of training. This fall the Ohio HIDTA, in conjunction with the Ohio BCI&I, will be conducting a 40 hour methamphetamine clandestine laboratory certification school for 45 Ohio law enforcement officers. Tentatively scheduled for 2006 are two workshops and two classes in the same subject area.

Legislation

In March 2005, several Ohio legislators introduced a bill restricting the amount of ephedrine-based cold medication that can be sold for each retail purchase. In addition, pharmacies are required to keep these types of medications behind the counter and are prohibited from selling these medications to minors. Effective April 15, 2005, HB 536 makes the theft of anhydrous ammonia a third degree felony regardless of the value of the stolen amount.

Recommendations

Supply reduction efforts must focus on limiting the access to precursor chemicals used in methamphetamine production. Specifically, these efforts create partnerships, either through state or federal legislation, to limit or control purchases of ephedrine or pseudoephedrine and keep these medications behind the counter as a Schedule V controlled substance. In addition, having stricter control over anhydrous ammonia is necessary. This summer there was a chilling example of how desperate a meth lab operator can become. In Greene County, Ohio, a meth lab operator was caught in the act of stealing anhydrous ammonia. When ordered several times by sheriff's deputies to surrender, the man continued to point a gun at the deputies and was finally shot to death. The further development of chemical additives to anhydrous ammonia that would render it unusable in the production of meth is strongly recommended.

Most importantly, continuous federal funding is needed in Ohio to address the “trail of destruction” resulting from this growing epidemic. Continued federal funding is necessary not only to respond to meth sites, but also for additional training, equipment, prevention, and public awareness.

At this time, I would like to have my Deputy Director, Pete Tobin, address this committee and outline our strong recommendations. For ten years he headed the Narcotics Division of the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Identification and Investigation (BCI&I) before coming to the Ohio HIDTA in January of this year. While with BCI&I he played a major role in preparing local law enforcement for the ensuing meth epidemic we are dealing with today.